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THE FIRST OFFICIAL THANKSGIVING IN ILLINOIS.

By ISABEL JAMISON.

As the day draws near which we, as a nation, will celebrate with greater accord and spontaneity than ever before, it may be interesting to recall the first official Thanksgiving in Illinois, and the causes which led to its observance, particularly as 1918 is the year of all years in our lives when our thoughts are turning backward to the early events of our state history.

In this particular locality, "Yankee" holidays were more honored in the breach than in the observance by the earliest settlers of "the Sangamo Country",—those adventurous spirits of Virginia and Kentucky who had followed the star of empire westward to the howling wilderness of Illinois, and who still implicitly believed in the importation of wives, whiskey and live stock from the bluegrass pastures and mountain fastnesses of their native states.

As we all know the first-comers into the Sangamo Country were for the most part, Kentucky pioneers, and, since the south and south-central portions of the state were about all that could be considered "settled" at that time, it naturally followed that the customs and traditions of the South predominated. The population turned out to celebrate New Year's, the 8th of January, Washington's birthday, the Fourth of July and Christmas, with much enthusiasm and in most cases, explosion of gunpowder and ringing of bells. The three purely patriotic holidays were further distinguished in the late 30's by the firing of a "*feu de joie*" at sunrise. Thanksgiving was merely a tradition of the "Yankees", whom the Kentuckians lumped carelessly as shrewd itinerants addicted, according to popular report, to the tinkering of clocks and the vending of wooden nutmegs in their natural

habitat, and who, being transplanted to western soil, could "dicker" in such a masterly and efficient manner that the party of the second part was considered fortunate if he escaped with his eye teeth intact.

Besides all that, the Yankees had never possessed broad plantations, hordes of negro laborers, or blooded horses careering over bluegrass pastures. No leisure moments were theirs for galloping over rolling hills in pursuit of a fleeing fox; no ears had they attuned to the melody of a well-balanced hound-pack; even a horse, they regarded in the main, as merely a vehicle able to negotiate Sangamon mud when no wheels that ever turned were able to do it. In short, it was theirs to manipulate the apple-parings of life, while the jovial southern planter made merry with the apple—including its juice—and tossed the core to his negro servant.

In the late 30's there was a small settlement of "Yankees" a few miles west of Springfield, who, according to an old settler with whom I talked, "were left pretty much to themselves and were not much thought of." It is quite possible that these derelicts of the prairie sea may have celebrated a quiet Thanksgiving of their own if they felt that they had any occasion for it, but if so, nobody seems to have noticed, or, at least, commented upon it. But when Simeon Francis, editor of the *Sangamo Journal* from 1831 to 1855, came to Springfield, he, being a native son of Connecticut in good and regular standing, openly deplored the absence of any regular observance of the Yankee holiday in his adopted western home. It was quite to be expected, therefore, when the *Chicago Democrat*, in the autumn of 1838, published what purported to be a Thanksgiving Proclamation issued by Governor Joseph Duncan, that the *Sangamo Journal* promptly copied it, while the editorial columns of the paper reflected the pleasure its editor felt on account of the adoption by Illinois of the Yankee holiday; nor did he fail to remind his readers that a pumpkin was indispensable to a correct observance of the day—and would some subscriber have the kindness to send him one?

Certainly the Proclamation had all the ear-marks of the genuine article, being couched in sounding phrases, and duly signed and sealed. It read as follows:

“STATE OF ILLINOIS.

FOR A DAY OF THANKSGIVING, PRAYER AND PRAISE.

“Whereas, for many years it has been customary in several states of the Union, to set apart one day in the year near its close, for the ascription of honor and praise to the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, for His infinite goodness to the children of men, in giving His only Son to be the Way, the Truth and the Light, and for His watchful providence in the days that are past, I, therefore, as the Executive of the State of Illinois, appoint Thursday, the 29th day of November next, as a Day of Public Thanksgiving, Prayer and Praise; and do earnestly beseech all its citizens to refrain from their usual occupations, and to devote it entirely to religious purposes—to the reviewal of their past life—to the confession of their manifold transgressions—to the amelioration of the poor and distressed—to the furtherance of the Gospel doctrines—to the liberation of those that are in bondage—to the reparation of injuries—to the promotion of friendly intercourse among their kindred and neighbors—to fervent prayer for all classes and conditions of men, and above, all, to the glorifying of their Heavenly Father for life, health and an unusual degree of prosperity among all branches of human industry; and, moreover, for the blessed Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, which is the Source of every blessing, and the Rock of all our hopes.

“Upon that day, let the Name of God be praised in the family circle and in the Holy Tabernacle, each one according to the dictates of his own conscience; and let prayers everywhere ascend for success to attend the efforts that are making for the unusual dissemination of the Christian religion, ‘that sovereign balm for every wound’ which alone, can fit us for an easy transition from this, to a world beyond the grave, ‘where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.’

“Given at Vandalia, this 25th day of October, in the year of our Lord 1838, of the Independence of the United States the 63rd, as a true copy for

A. P. FIELD,
Secretary of State.

JOSEPH DUNCAN,
Governor.

In the *Sangamo Journal* of December 1st, 1838, the editor made the following statement to the public:

"We are constrained to believe that the Proclamation purporting to have been issued by Governor Duncan for a "Day of Public Thanksgiving, Prayer and Praise", published in last week's paper, is a forgery. We have come to this conclusion with much regret, because, in the first place, a proclamation for the observance of a day for public thanksgiving, prayer and praise we would consider proper and appropriate; and, in the second place, we were loth to believe that any man having access to the columns of a newspaper, would deliberately perpetrate such a forgery. The spurious Proclamation first appeared in that vehicle of loco focoism, the *Chicago Democrat*."

As wild turkeys and pumpkins were plentiful, to say nothing of other ingredients necessary to a proper culinary observance of the day, it is very probable that the Proclamation was productive of some orthodox Thanksgiving dinners, forgery or no forgery.

Of one of these, at least, we are certain,—a "stag party" which took place at the American House in Springfield, a pretentious building just completed by Elijah Iles, to reinforce the hotel accommodations of the new State Capital. It was the most ambitious structure that had, as yet, been provided for public entertainment in Springfield, and while most of the hotel proprietors in the town were Kentuckians or Virginians, the American House opened triumphantly November 24th, 1838, under the auspices of a real, live Bostonian. Thus it happened that, when this adventurous pilgrim from the city of beans entered the arena of public hospitality in Springfield, a few kindred spirits, hungry and thirsty for real Thanksgiving cheer, quietly planned among themselves to hold a rousing little celebration that would, so to speak, "knock the spots" off anything the Battle of New Orleans or Washington's Birthday had ever shown Sangamon county in the line of good cheer.

Mine host, Clifton, was only too pleased to demonstrate, so early in the game, what Boston enterprise could do in the way of banquets, and accordingly on Thanksgiving—at the hour of midnight—a little band of self-convicted Yankees

(the late Mr. Edward R. Thayer, who related the story to me, being one of the number) sat down in the dining room of the American House, to such a Thanksgiving dinner as we read about—and the participants probably dream about, afterwards.

As the solid viands disappeared, and the liquid refreshments began to stir the blood of young New England to greater enthusiasm, its expression became more vociferous. Songs and toasts went around the board, and the fun was at its height when the door at the end of the banquet hall swung open and the small, determined figure of the hostess of the American House stood upon the threshold. There was a glint in her eye that boded no good to the hilarious guests. Her voice rang through the suddenly silent room with a finality that was convincing:

“Men”—she said—“I cannot call you *gentlemen*, since you are behaving like anything else—I will not allow this uproar! Do you not know that this house is full of guests who are unable to sleep on account of this disgraceful carousal?”

Like an assemblage of naughty boys detected by the schoolmistress in the act of affixing a bent pin to her chair, the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers sat in abashed silence. Finally, mine host, Clifton, who had probably had previous experience in dealing with emergencies of a similar character, rallied to the rescue. “Come along, boys,” he exclaimed, “let’s go down to the wash-room where we can make all the noise we want to.” He led the way; each man grasped such portion of the good cheer of the occasion as was nearest to him and followed, leaving the small lady completely mistress of the field.

No regular Thanksgiving celebration was held during the following two or three years. Governor Carlin, who succeeded Joseph Duncan, was said to be averse to issuing Thanksgiving Proclamations, it being hinted by members of the opposition, that he preferred to spend his time issuing State Bonds. However, by 1841, the northern part of the state had begun to feel the influence of a population that was drifting in from the East and which had, generally speaking, been brought up on Thanksgiving dinners; and the Presby-

terian State Synod, at its fall meeting that year, adopted a resolution recommending to the churches under its care, the observance of Thursday, November 25th, as a day of Thanksgiving for the blessings of the past year. This gave the new holiday quite an impetus, and while the church-goers sternly fixed their minds upon prayer and praise observances, the ungodly rank and file began to cast an appreciative eye upon some of the more material features of the austere festival. Even if Thanksgiving sermons were not much in their line, they were prepared to do their full duty by the Thanksgiving dinners; and, in 1842, the last barrier went down before the following memorial, which was presented to Governor Carlin: "To His Excellency, the Governor of Illinois:

"The Synod of the Presbyterian Church, in session at Bloomington, believing that it is the duty of all people to acknowledge their obligations to God, in Whom we live and move and have our being, we therefore respectfully request Your Excellency, in view of the general peace and prosperity enjoyed by the inhabitants of this State, and the abundant fruits of the earth which have crowned the labors of the husbandmen, and the various other mercies which we, as a people, have received from the munificent hand of our Creator, to appoint, as a Day of Thanksgiving, the last Thursday of December next; and to call upon the inhabitants of the State to meet together in their respective houses of worship, and with gladness of heart, to thank God for these blessings, and to ask a continuance of them for the sake of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

By Order of the Synod,
November 4th, 1842." L. P. KIMBALL, *Clerk*.

Eight days later, Governor Carlin issued his Proclamation, as follows:

"Quincy, Ill., Nov. 12th, 1842.

In conformity to the foregoing request, I, Thomas Carlin, Governor of the State of Illinois, do appoint the last Thursday of December next as a Day of Thanksgiving throughout the State, and request the inhabitants thereof, generally, to meet in their respective houses of worship, there to return thanks to Almighty God for the kind preservation and manifold blessings bestowed upon us as a people, and

devotionally ask a continuance of His mercies, for the sake of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

(Signed) THOMAS CARLIN."

The memorial of the Synod, and the Proclamation were printed together, as an example of cause and effect, probably, or, perhaps Governor Carlin felt that he ought to give a weighty reason for issuing the Proclamation at all. That it was an innovation is proved by the fact that Mr. Francis, of the *Sangamo Journal*, called attention to the fact that while the Proclamation was not couched in the ancient and approved form, it did very well for a beginning; he also delicately hinted that, since a goodly portion of the community was not thoroughly broken to Thanksgiving observances and might not possess the knowledge of what was required by immemorial usage", he would offer a few suggestions, not as to the spiritual preparations which would be attended to by the "dominies", but on strictly material lines. We trust that his suggestions, which follow, were accepted in the helpful spirit in which they were given:

"A large supply of the good things of life are required, such as turkeys, chickens, geese, partridges, and such like. Families give out their invitations to the dinner a week ahead, so that all can go like clock-work. All the eatables, including a large lot of pumpkin pies, are prepared for the oven the night beforehand.

"At 11 o'clock on Thanksgiving Day, all the supernumeraries of the family (leaving only those at home necessary to perform the duties of cooking) proceed to church where the service is of great length, rendered so by the singing of one or two extra hymns. This is done to impress the inner man with due solemnity of the importance of the Day—and also has the effect of sharpening the appetite of the outer man for the things that are about to be set before him. There is no hesitancy that we have ever discovered under such circumstances, in hastening from the church to fulfill their respective engagements. The tables are soon filled and the important business of eating is performed with all due deliberation. The old then retire to talk over the occurrences of younger days, the children romp, and the young men and girls prepare for the interesting duties of the evening—what

those are, all can judge. At such times the young ladies are generally at home, and the young men are generally more courageous than usual.

"The remaining part of the week, (Thanksgiving should always be set on Thursday, as Governor Carlin has very properly done in this case), should be spent in visiting, social parties and such, and when Saturday night comes, in reckoning up matters it is usually found that, in neighborhoods, old grudges are healed, new courtships are under progress, and the people are generally better satisfied with their condition and happier by far than before the Thanksgiving holiday. And we trust that Governor Carlin's Thanksgiving will be productive of these good fruits."

In closing his suggestions, Mr. Francis urged everybody to remember the poor, as Thanksgiving is a most fitting time to remember the widow, the orphan and the distressed; also not to forget to "send the '*dominie*' a couple of turkies", which would indicate that the pastor's quiver was well-filled, unless, indeed, the "turkies" of that day were inclined to be skinny.

An unsigned poem, entitled "Governor Carlin's Thanksgiving", was published by the *Sangamo Journal*, and may have flowed from the facile pen of John Hancock, "The Bard of the Sangamo", or may be the production of any one of a number of literary aspirants of the time, who, like the immortal Wegg, were liable at any time to "drop into poetry in the light of a friend".

"Let the bards of Old England their festivals boast of,
In rhymes' silver jingle each holiday blazon;
Each Yankee Thanksgiving's the pride and the toast of
The theme of all others to lavish his praise on;
When Jim laughs at labor, and Nance decks her hair,
And Poll, in her finery, a pink is as nice as,
When pumpkins are plenty, and all is so rare
With ginger and 'lasses and notions and spices;
And so, do ye see, of all days of the year,
Thanksgiving's a nation-sight best and most dear."

In accordance with the request of the Governor, Thanksgiving services were held in most of the churches, and the

Legislature, which was in session at the time, met in the morning and immediately thereafter, adjourned for the day.

In the evening, Colonel Prentiss gave a party in the District Court room, and members of the different churches called at the residences of their pastors and paid their respects.

Very quietly Springfield, and the state generally, slipped into an observance of the holiday which has come to mean a great deal to the Prairie State, and it seems only fitting that its earliest celebration of the day should stand side by side with its greatest—that of the Centennial year of the State.